



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Thomas Jefferson, 1802

Norfolk, Virginia
Master William Ham

A founding father of the United States, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, and the third U.S. president.

Builder: Norfolk, Virginia

Rig: Schooner

Length:

Beam:

Draft:

Displacement:

Cost:

Commissioned: 1802

Disposition: Placed out of service in 1817

Compliment:

Armament:

Cutter History:

Cutter: *Thomas Jefferson* was constructed and commissioned in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1802. The cutter served out of Savannah, Georgia, until 1809, when the new cutter *James Madison* began serving the Savannah station. From then on, *Thomas Jefferson* served out of Norfolk and was decommissioned and sold there in 1817. Little else is known about the cutter.

Master: William Ham received his commission as a 2nd mate of Norfolk-based cutter *Virginia* on August 13, 1791, and served as an officer on Norfolk-based cutters, such as *Thomas Jefferson*, until at least 1822. He received a master's commission for the Commonwealth of Virginia on July 6, 1804, and commanded

Thomas Jefferson throughout the War of 1812. Little is known about his career after 1822.

War of 1812 Events and Operations:

May 25, 1812. *Thomas Jefferson* sails the Hampton Roads area with U.S. Navy Captain Stephen Decatur and others on board to survey the locations of existing lighthouses and proposed signal towers for a military “telegraph” system using flags during the day and fires at night.

June 25, 1812. *Thomas Jefferson* captures British schooner *Patriot* bound from Guadeloupe to Halifax with a cargo of sugar. This was the first maritime capture of the War of 1812.

September 2, 1812. *Thomas Jefferson* seizes brigs *Ariadne* and *Rockland* for carrying illegal cargoes and escorts them into Norfolk, Virginia.

December 28, 1812. In response to a letter from the Boston Customs Collector, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin writes, “*A Revenue Cutter cannot be expressly fitted and employed for the purpose of cruising against an enemy except under the 98th Section of the collection law in which case the Cutter must be placed under the direction of the Secretary of the Navy.*”

March 15, 1813. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, by authority of the president, orders the Norfolk customs collector to “immediately extinguish” the lights and remove the lamps, oil and “*other moveable apparatus*” in all lighthouses located in the Chesapeake Bay “*for the purpose of preventing the enemy again putting up the lights.*”

April 11, 1813. *Thomas Jefferson* together with a pilot boat and local militia capture three Royal Navy barges, including approximately sixty British officers and enlisted men. The armed American party also repatriated the crew of the American merchantman *Flight*, captured earlier by the British barges. The *Alexandria Gazette* (April 19) reported, “*The barges attempted to escape up [the] James River, but were overhauled so fast, that they hove to and surrendered.*” And . . . “*as the Cutter was about to pour a broadside into them, the lieutenant displayed a white flag and said, that it was not their intention to make any resistance, upon which assurance Capt. Ham ordered them ashore and sent them under an escort of forty riflemen, to Hampton.—There were in these three launches about fifty Englishmen . . . The loss of so many men and barges at this time will embarrass the enemy not a little, as it will weaken very considerably his means of annoyance.*”

January 1, 1814. The Baltimore newspaper reports that the schooner *Despatch* was boarded by the *Thomas Jefferson* and sent into Norfolk for breaching the embargo. Enemy ships had chased the schooner into the shelter of Hampton Roads.

August 8, 1814. Peace negotiations between the United States and Great Britain begin in Ghent, Belgium.

December 24, 1814. Peace treaty (Treaty of Ghent) signed between representatives of the United States and Great Britain at a ceremony in Ghent, Belgium.

January 8, 1815. Americans defeat a British army in the Battle of New Orleans in the last major land engagement of the war.

February 11, 1815. Under the white flag, HMS *Favorite* (18) delivers the peace treaty, Treaty of Ghent, to New York City.

February 16, 1815. President Madison signs Treaty of Ghent officially ending the War of 1812.

February 25, 1815. Treasury Secretary Alexander J. Dallas issues a circular to all customs collectors regarding future policy in light of the conclusion of the war. In the two-page circular, he instructs, “[cutter] *officers and men must be recommended for their vigilance, activity, skill and good conduct.*” Dallas later directs that “*Smuggling, in every form, must be prevented, or punished. And if it be not prevented, the officers of the customs, according to their respective duties and stations, will be held answerable to prove, that there was no want of vigilance on their part.*” In the final paragraph, Dallas lists other duties to be carried out by the customs officials, hence their respective cutters, including “*immediate measures will be taken, for restoring the light-houses, piers, buoys, and beacons, within your district and jurisdiction, to the state in which they were before the war*”.

March 3, 1815. Congress repeals “*the acts prohibiting the entrance of foreign vessels into the waters of the United States*”, thereby repealing elements of the Non-Intercourse and Non-Importation acts.

May 30, 1815. Treasury Secretary Alexander Dallas writes the New York customs collector about building one or more schooner-rigged cutters to replace those lost in the war.

Sources:

Cutter History File, Coast Guard Historian's Office.

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